

Locked

Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

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It might just be my imagination, but it seems like the “home security” aisles in hardware superstores have doubled in the last decade. And ads for “security monitoring systems”—there seems to be a flyer that falls out of every bill I open. I can receive “total protection and security” for only \$29.99 a month!

Locks come in all shapes and sizes, and not just in the hardware store. It is quite natural when you have suffered some trauma in life, when you have been violated by some injustice—to lock yourself away. Self-isolation is an attractive alternative to a painful life. Rather than risking pain and vulnerability, better to close the door, click the lock, and, if you can’t have love, at least you can have some degree of “feeling safe.”

All this comes into focus today for me because of our text. Here, directly on the heels of Easter, John tells us Jesus’ disciples are afraid and locked away behind whatever security system they could devise. They had already endured enough threat, enough violence, enough pain, enough loss. The thought of more...more of any of that was just too much to bear, so break out the new deadbolts! Fear and risk and pain will work that way with any of us.¹

I don’t blame them for locking the doors against those who wanted to mock them. I wouldn’t blame them for locking the doors against their grief and despair. I wouldn’t blame them for locking the doors against their fear. I wouldn’t blame them for just locking any door they could find.

It’s not just grief or loss or fear that does this. There are teenagers in some cities of this country who have never been more than eight blocks in any direction from where they live. Some of it is boundaries of gang territory. Some of it is they have never been offered a reason to go farther. There are no locks, at least as we see locks. But they are locked down. They are locked out.

A teacher in one of those settings once reflected that her greatest challenge was day after day looking into the eyes of her high school students and seeing students who had simply shut down. They had failed so often, had experienced so often the door slamming in their faces, that they had withdrawn, they had locked the door and thrown away the key, so to speak. “My whole teaching is involved in desperately searching for some key that can unlock that mind and give me some entrance into their souls,” she said.²

Locks can work both ways. They lock out, but they also lock in. I wonder which was the reality for Jesus’ disciples that Easter evening in that locked room? Were they more afraid of what the opponents of Jesus might do to them if they got through the door? Or were they really worried about a Jesus who, at least since Easter morning, didn’t seem to stop at anything--doors, crosses, graves--to get to where he was most needed.

Neither the government nor the temple were the threat in this text. Jesus was. Jesus was...the alarm. And sometimes, we lock ourselves away from the very thing

which will help us, the very one who will save us.

The amazing news of the Risen Christ is that security systems can multiply by leaps and bounds, and dead bolt locks and infrared monitoring devices can take up an acre of shelf space at Home Depot, and none of that will prevent Jesus from doing God's saving work.

There is a problem when we focus too closely in this text on Thomas--"doubting Thomas." Jesus is the focus here: The Jesus who gets into the locked room. This Jesus who freely shows his wounds, fresh from the cross. It doesn't matter what those disciples feared or what they dreaded: he comes in peace, he offers blessing, Jesus is peace. Huddled in that locked room on Easter evening, they thought they were safe. But...how do you define "safe"? The risen Christ will not be locked away by death in the tomb, nor will he be locked away from trying to get to you and me—to bless us, to save us.

Anne LaMotte's birthday was yesterday. I know many of you know her writing. Growing up in the Bay Area, she did well in school, she was a tennis star and went to Goucher College in Maryland on a tennis scholarship. But she drank too much, became an alcoholic and bulimic as well, and dropped out of college after two years. She struggled to get back on her feet, even though she was doing well as a writer--she wrote for magazines and published two novels—but her health was getting worse, with even more drugs and drinking.

One night, feeling weak and drunk and miserable, she said,

I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner.... The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there--of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled--I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

Instead, she started attending a tiny church and slowly changing her life. She published her third novel, which got bad reviews and caused her to drink even more. Every morning, she woke up not knowing what had happened the night before, and she had to call friends to find out. Finally, she was speaking at a benefit for 150 people who had all paid to come hear her talk, and she drank so much during her speech that she passed out in the middle of it. So she decided to get sober, and slowly she did, and has been ever since. Her faith and her quirky, knowing, off beat descriptions of life as a follower of Jesus have touched so many and helped them unlock their souls.³

Locks come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and guises. You think locks are defending against one thing only to find that another thing is left vulnerable. The lock that keeps out a bad thing ends up impeding a good thing. The lock we think we have secured against pain ends up providing an obstacle to healing. The lock that defends against a threat becomes the most significant barrier to forgiveness. Who knew?

In the cities and in the churches I've served, I've made a casual study of why and when and where church buildings lock their doors. The most general summary

statement I can make is, the “higher” (liturgically speaking) the church, the more the doors are unlocked. Roman Catholic, Episcopal, some Lutheran churches--wide open. Baptist, Assembly of God, Free Methodist--locked up tight. Presbyterian Churches tend to be in the middle of the spectrum, but a little more Baptist or Free Methodist in our employment of locksmiths. Locked up tight, for the most part.

And why? “Well, things could happen if someone got in here.” I do remember when I arrived as pastor of a church in downtown Denver, this was a real concern. What would happen if the doors were unlocked? We had a large men’s homeless shelter in the basement of the church. There was even talk that we needed to strengthen the locks on the door that led out of the basement from the shelter and right into our narthex. One night, as choir practice ended and an older woman headed down the street toward her car, out of an alley came someone who tried to snatch her purse. Three of the shelter residents saw this down the block as they were sitting on the steps of the church and gave chase, protecting the woman and retrieving her purse. Funny, I never heard another word about stronger locks to protect “us” from the shelter.

But, finally, this text doesn’t have anything to do with locks. Because, as any locksmith or anyone who has served with the police will tell you, in the end, no lock ever is as good as it needs to be. The text does not bring us “security,” it brings us the gospel. This is the good news: Jesus doesn’t care about locks. If you need them, go ahead, but he will pick them, he will ignore them, he will knock down or go around or find a way in through every lock we put up between him and us. You can hear that as God’s promise. Some days, you or I may hear that as a threat.

Either way, God is a God who will not stop. God is a God who takes initiative. God is a God whose love does not recognize boundaries, so surely isn’t going to mind a few locked doors. God intends to be with us—to love us, to forgive us, to heal us, to walk with us—even in our fear and our doubts. On Easter evening, Jesus chose first to come back and announce Easter again! It is the truth of Easter that God will find a way to give you what you need, even if you’ve locked yourself away from receiving it. God will find a way to give you everything you need, even when you can’t name it or imagine it or are afraid of it or can’t grasp it.

Father Gregory Boyle tells the story of taking two gang members, Chepe and Richie, along with him, out of the projects of Los Angeles to give a series of speeches several towns away. Boyle runs “Home Boy Industries,” which for 20 years has been a ministry to try to offer gang members a way out of that life with jobs and support and a new direction. While on this speaking tour, Boyle took them out to a restaurant called Coco’s for dinner. Coco’s was, as he put it, “one notch above Denny’s, one notch below everywhere else.” When they walked in, they encountered a hostess who made no secret of the fact that she strongly disapproved of Boyle’s dinner companions, whose dress and tattoos clearly marked them as gang members. Locks come in many different shapes and sizes and work in all different ways in our lives.

Boyle was furious at the way she treated them. “I know exactly the origin of her displeasure, and I volley some of my own right back at her,” he writes. “I judge her just as surely as she judges them.” Finally, she grabs three menus and takes them through the restaurant, far into the back where there are no other diners. Chepe and Richie haven’t missed what’s happening. “Everybody’s looking at us,” Richie says. “Don’t be ridiculous,” responds Boyle, but, he writes, “Everybody was looking at us.”

Their discomfort lasted until the waitress came. For whatever reason, she was a whole different breed of person than the hostess and all the diners whose judgment of the gang members was so palpable. She put her arms around Chepe and Richie, talked with them, joked with them, asked about them, called them “Sweetie” and “Honey” and brought them refills they didn’t ask for. Says Boyle: “She was Jesus in an apron.”⁴ I’m tempted to say she was a locksmith. I think we could say that, in that moment with those vulnerable kids, she was Easter.

It is the Easter truth that God will find a way to give you what you need. God will find a way to give you everything you need.

Jesus Christ is risen! Hallelujah! Jesus Christ is coming...for you and to you and you and you and you and you...Hallelujah!

Notes

1 This section was inspired by the exegesis and interpretive work done by William Willimon in the section for the Second Sunday of Easter, Pulpit Resource, 2nd Quarter, 2007, Logos Productions.

2 Ibid.

3 Garrison Keillor, “The Writer’s Almanac,” April 10, 2010, Prairie Home Productions, American Public Media.

4 Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Free Press, 2010.